ANGELS WE HAVE HEARD ON HIGH
Luke 2:1-20
December 25, 1983

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"Are we going to have church on Christmas Day?" It is a question I was asked frequently during the past several weeks by all sorts and conditions of humanity: by those whose attendance is seasonal at best and for whom the concurrence of Christmas Day and Sunday presents a kind of ecclesiastical double whammy: by the regular church-goer who has been at least once and frequently twice on each Sunday in Advent, with the Bach Oratorio last week and the Candlelight Service last night thrown in for good measure, and for whom going to church this morning feels like the fourteenth inning of a baseball game that should have ended an hour earlier - i.e. the activity is still wonderful but enough, after all, is enough. It has been asked by both youngsters and their parents who disliked even contemplating an interruption of the morning festivities around the tree and who have taken with the proverbial grain of salt my well-intentioned suggestions that a late morning break from the action might even make the day more interesting. And with just as much skepticism as we used to feel when told that the castor oil would do wonders for us if it didn't kill us on the way down. And in fairness the question has been posed by members of my own household who I do not ordinarily like to quote, but who, in this instance, probably spoke for many with the tough but realistic - "Well all right, but you're not going to preach are you?"

The news, as is usually the case, is both good and bad. The bad news is that I'm going to preach; the good news is - not for long.

As a matter of fact some of the reluctance inherent in the questions about whether we should even be here is well founded. No less an authority than John Calvin - I am sure you are tired of hearing preachers tell you - said that the creeds of the church should be sung, not said. What he meant is that music is a far better medium in which to express the essentials of faith than rational discourse. Every preacher knows exactly what that means and so, I believe, do people who listen to sermons. The fanciest homily on the incarnation doesn't approach, in terms of truth and beauty and power, a simple verse of "Silent Night, Holy Night."

I found an essay the late Reinhold Niebuhr wrote in 1933 - reprinted in an anniversary edition of the Christian Century last fall. The title, "A Christmas Service in Retrospect," Neibuhr wrote:

> "I went to church in the cathedral on Christmas Day. It is one of the few days of the year on which I am able to attend church without preaching myself. On that day I prefer a liturgical church with as little sermon as possible. It's not that I don't like to hear anyone but myself preach. I merely dislike most Christmas...sermons. Only poets can do it justice..."

Those who protest much preaching on this day, therefore, are in very good company. Something of the poetry and beauty is lost when we become too cerebral about it. And some of the plainness and ordinariness gets lost when we encase it in too much theology.

The meeting between young Mary and her elderly cousin Elizabeth is a highly stylized encounter, painted thousands of times, memorialized in the heavenly beauty of J. S. Bach's "Magnificat." Mary's hymn - "My soul magnifies the Lord" is one of four interesting canticles in the opening section of Luke's Gospel. And many believe that it was used liturgically by the early church.

It is beautiful poetry and it contains a clear expression of the remarkable idea of God's passion, God's partisanship. The birth of Mary's son is presented in a way that seems to advocate the cause of the downtrodden. You don't have to read between the lines: there is no attempt to disguise the partisanship. With talk like "scattering the proud and pulling the mighty from their thrones" in the air it was no wonder King Herod was interested in eliminating the baby as quickly as possible.

One way to deal with this perplexing and disturbing hymn is to transpose literally, to see the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the vehicle of social upheaval and revolution. And, in fact, the downtrodden, the poor, the oppressed have always read themselves in this text. It is no accident that the Virgin Mary is adored and venerated with extraordinary passion in countries where poverty and political oppression are the norm. You can't read the Bible, after all, from the perspective of a poor person and not be interested at least in a day when "the hungry are filled and the rich are sent empty away." You can't hear these words from the perspective of a political prisoner - Lech Walesa for instance - and not be interested in a day when the mighty are pulled from their thrones. I have been told that there are places in Central and South America where to read Luke 1:38-56 is regarded as a subversive act. And it doesn't take much imagination to feel and understand what the Magnificat means to the El Salvadorian peasant, absolutely poor, powerless, working a plot of ground owned by a land lord who now lives in a condominium in Miami Beach, whose son has been murdered by government troops, trained in the United States. You and I have to work at it, and it is not easy for us, but we must understand that this Advent text means something altogether different when it is heard in the context of Third World poverty and political oppression.

Much of the theology being written today makes us uncomfortable. It is called Liberation Theology. Sometimes it sounds like Marxism. Sometimes that is what it is. And sometimes it is the honest attempt of faithful Christian people to bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ into dialogue with a culture characterized by injustice, grinding poverty and hopelessness. The government of El Salvador, to which we are heavily committed, either cannot stop, or does not wish to stop the wanton, systematic slaughter of its own people by Right Wing death squads: 20,000-30,000, including priests, Archbishop Oscar Romero, American Aid officials, labor organizers, people who attend the wrong meetings, talk to the wrong people, and, of course four American nuns. When the relatives of the 30,000 victims hear the Magnificat, they don't need help identifying the proud, the mighty. And what we can't seem to understand is that to those people socialism, Marxism if they know or even care about them, are not threatening ideas, but appear to be hopeful alternatives to being murdered. The tragedy, the continuing tragedy is that we who know best about human dignity and freedom have simply conceded the struggle for the hearts of people to the Marxists in far too many places.

We must listen. We must try to understand what is happening in Chile, Argentina, Bolivia, Nicaragua, El Salvador, Guatemala. One of the Liberation Theologians Jose Miguez Bonino, an Argentine, put it this way: "God has chosen sides- he has chosen to liberate the poor by delivering them from their misery and marginality, and to liberate the rich by bringing them down from their thrones." Bonino makes me very uncomfortable. He is a Marxist. He is also a Christian. (Theologians in Transition, p. 172)

Now four observations:

One - We don't have to agree with that, but in that we're all starting from the same text it would be foolish not to listen to it, to pretend that it isn't there.

Two - "We can't resign from the middle class." Harvey Cox, a Harvard Professor, said that, by the way. Cox rather likes Liberation Theology but is honest enough to acknowledge that he is who he is, namely a comfortable teacher at a very comfortable institution.

Three - The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a "Five Year Plan for Redistributing the Wealth." It is not about economics essentially, but about humanity in dialogue with God. It is not simply spiritual - nor is it simply political.

Four - What the Gospel will do, if we bring anything more than superficial interest to it, is force us to be honest about ourselves and to identify some of the myths, the half truths, by which we are living.

When that honest self examination happens we usually discover that we're not as comfortable, at ease, well off, as we like to think we are. Left to our own devices we don't ordinarily come to these conclusions. It's the artists, the poets, the writers, who keep raising the issue, questioning our myths. **The Wasteland,** T. S. Eliot called our culture. Erich Fromm, in the classic The Art of Loving wrote: "Happiness today consists in 'having fun.' 'Having fun,' lies in the satisfaction of consuming...The world is one great object for our appetite, a big apple, a big bottle, we are the eternally hopeful ones - and the eternally disappointed ones." (p. 73) Gertrude Stein said it with tongue in cheek, "When we get there there is no there there." One wonders if the parents who have engaged in physical battle in the aisles of toy departments all over the country to buy their children a Cabbage Patch doll find that "there is no there there when you get there." In her memoirs, Simone de Beauvoir wrote "I think with sadness of all the books I have read, all the places I have seen, all the knowledge I've amassed. The promises have all been kept. And yet I realize with stupor how much I was gypped." (Hans Kung, Does God Exist?, p. 693) And John Steinbeck whose novel The Winter of our Discontent was presented on television last week, wrote about the emptiness and dryness of the American dream of riches and power and security.

Mary's hymn contains God's word to us because you can't receive a gift unless you have some room in your life for the gift, can be pleased and delighted with the gift, in a sense need what the gift represents. If you already have it all, the exchange will be only as significant as the flower the little girl gives to the visiting dignitary who, in one motion, receives, smiles, says a polite "thank you" and hands it over to an attendant whose job it is to carry the unneeded gifts. You can't educate someone who already knows it all. The miracle of learning happens somewhere close to the acknowledgement of ignorance. In fact, a good education is always at least in part a humble acknowledgement of the existence of beauty and truth bigger than one which I do not own and can never fully own, and which I will always need. You can't love someone so full of herself or himself that there is no need for love to touch and no emptiness for love to fill.

"I heard Alice gasp and she poked me. 'I don't think it's very nice to burp the baby Jesus,' she whispered, 'as if he had colic.' Then she poked me again. 'Do you suppose he could have had colic?'

"I said, 'I don't know why not,' and I didn't. He could have had colic, or been fussy, or hungry like any other baby. After all, that was the whole point of Jesus - that he didn't come down on a cloud like something out of 'Amazing Comics,' but that he was born and lived...a real person."

The other is from A Christmas Memory, a gem of a short story by Truman Capote - which does for me what an angel is supposed to do.

I was introduced to it by a member of this congregation who shares it with others each year. In it Capote reflects on the Christmas observances in a large and eccentric and poor Southern household. The story is told from the perspective - and memory - of a seven year old boy. It involves his 63 year old cousin, referred to as "my friend": "...a woman with shorn white hair, wearing tennis shoes and a shapeless gray sweater over a summery calico dress." The women is mentally a young child. The two make fruitcakes together, collecting the pecans, shelling them, pooling meager resources to purchase the precious ingredients, including a frightening trip to a sinful "fish-fry and dancing cafe" for a quart of whiskey. The fruitcakes will be sent to an interesting gift list which includes President Roosevelt, the Baptist missionaries in Borneo and Abner Packer, driver of the six o'clock bus to Mobile.

Christmas is modest enough for the two friends: each receives an assortment of small gifts, hand-me-down clothing, a subscription to a religious magazine. For years they have made and given each other kites. On Christmas Day, after the gifts have been opened, off they go for a private celebration, flying the kites.

"The wind is blowing, and nothing will do till we've run to a pasture below the house where Queenie has scooted to bury her bone (and where, a winter hence, Queenie will be buried, too). There, plunging through the healthy waist-high grass, we unreel our kites, feel them twitching at the string like sky fish as they swim into the wind. Satisfied, sun-warmed, we sprawl in the grass and peel Satsumas and watch our kites cavort. Soon I forget the socks and hand-me-down sweater. I'm as happy as if we'd already won the fifty-thousand-dollar Grand Prize in that coffee-naming contest.

"'My, how foolish I am!' my friend cries, suddenly alert, like a woman remembering too late she has biscuits in the oven. 'You know what I've always thought?' she asks in a tone of discovery, and not smiling at me but a point beyond. 'I've always thought a body would have to be sick and dying before they saw the Lord. And I imagined that when He came it would be like looking at the Baptist window: pretty as colored glass with the sun pouring through, such a shine you don't know it's getting dark. And it's been a comfort: to think of that shine taking away all the spooky feeling. But I'll wager it never happens. I'll wager at the very end a body realizes the Lord has already shown Himself. That things as they are' - her hands circles in a gesture that gathers clouds and kites and grass and Queenie pawing earth over her bone - 'just what they've always seen, was seeing Him, As for me, I could leave the world with today in my eyes.'"

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Christian hope is an Advent theme and it is predicated on a doctrine which was forged in one of the bleakest parts of the Christian story - the time after Jesus, the first generation of the church. Christians were being persecuted intensely. They were powerless in the face of the Roman authorities. They were nothing but a nuisance the empire had decided to eliminate. And so when they gathered to contemplate their own grimly apocalyptic future, they recalled the ancient Jewish promise of the Day of the Lord, the restoration of the Davidic monarchy when the king would return. And they recalled the words of Jesus about the kingdom of God coming in the world: and they articulated a doctrine about the second coming of Christ on the clouds which shortly became a problem for them and which has confused Christian people ever since.

When interpreted literally the image of the second coming they left for us has stimulated countless folk to sell all their belongings and stand around waiting for the end of the world. They were doing it in Thessalonica and some folks are still doing it. The fact that the end didn't come - didn't come as even Jesus said it would, caused the writer of the fourth Gospel, for instance, to suggest that Jesus Christ has already come again: that there is a second coming whenever God's spirit is at work in the human enterprise.

Now because of the excesses of the literalists who are waiting for the end of the world, we don't pay much attention to the doctrine. And that's too bad because it is where the hope in Christianity is located: not that Jesus is going to descend on clouds and gather all the folk who belong to the right church and consign the rest of us to hell, but that Jesus Christ will keep showing up - will not abandon human history - but will keep appearing as a hopeful, redemptive possibility: an energy, if you will, an impetus in the direction opposite from the way things are going, the direction of healing, and reconciliation and hope.

What it means today is important; namely that we can count on a redemptive possibility in even the darkest valleys. Sometimes we may not like the form it takes. Sometimes we may not recognize it. We may deplore the methods of the protestors - but they raise the issue of life and hope for us. We can't expect God to intervene to save the human race, but we can look for God in the frustrations and impatience and deep love of good people who are saying to one another now, "let's get together and talk about this" instead of quaking in terror, people who gathered in churches and townhalls and schools last Monday to share their deep concern for their country and the whole human race.

God will break in, Christ will come again and it will be personal. One of my favorite writers Frederick Buechner said in an interview recently, "Listen to what's happening in your own life...to experiences that somehow, even if you can't say how - seem either to illumine, or to be illumined by, religious truth. Pay special attention to those times when you find tears in your eyes, even if you don't know why the tears are there. Listen to your life." (Christian Century, 11/83)

Text - Be watchful

I suppose the most common, nearly universal response to Advent is a kind of surprise. This year is no exception: "Don't tell me it's here already! Why it was just Labor Day." We're not ready and that's just the point. We never are. and one of the reasons is that the very event which documents our hope in history - the birth of Jesus - has become such a warmly sentimental holiday: all nostalgia and focusing on the past. The thrust you see, is meant to be the future.

Sometimes bread is more than bread. Thus, the traditional Jewish prayer, even more ancient than the Celtic: "Blessed art thou, O Lord, our God, King of the world, who bringest forth bread from the earth."

Sometimes bread is more than bread. Sometimes, most times, it is quintessentially the food we need to live. Let me tell you more about bread than you probably wished to know. It's production has consumed most of the attention of most of the people who ever lived. Bread represents civilization. Wandering, nomadic people don't eat much bread. Manna in the wilderness is a great, life-giving miracle, because you don't have the capacity to produce bread if you're on the road the better part of forty years. Anthropologically speaking, the manna the children of Israel ate in the wilderness was a lab exercise in the kind of life they could lead in the promised land if they promised to settle down and plow some fields instead of wandering around the desert, living in tents. Bread means civilization.

There were bakers in wealthy households in the ancient world and they were good at their art: they experimented with ingredients, baking methods, shapes and sizes. But for the vast majority of households in the ancient world, baking bread was what you did, most of the day, every day, day in and day out, as long as you lived.

The dough was made from wheat flour and water, supplemented by whatever other cereal meal was available. In Canaan the people learned to crumble and knead a piece of yesterday's bread to provide leavening. Baking could be as simple as a heated rock and the flat round cake covered with hot ashes, or as sophisticated as a kind of convection oven made of an inverted earthen jar. The loaf was ordinarily an 18 inch disk, like a small pizza. Three per day - was the basic diet. One of its major functions, from the beginning, was to convey other food into the mouth, an edible utensil, a practice we have all seen our youngsters try on occasion.

Even in antiquity bread is celebrated for its power as a symbol. The Old Testament employs a variety of images - the bread of idleness, bread of deceit, bread of tears, breads of adversity. And then, one time, one of them drew all of that meaning together and gave the world something it has never yet been able to stop pondering. Jesus said: "I am the bread of life; he who comes to me shall not hunger."

He had fed a large crowd of people with a few loaves of bread and a few fish. The next day part of that same crowd had followed him. They became uncomfortable when he wondered out loud about their motives. For their part, they revealed those motives clearly and impatiently by saying: "What work do you perform? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness. He gave them bread from heaven." Translate that: "How about some more of that bread, Jesus?" And he said, "...the bread of God is that which comes down from heaven and gives life to the world." And they said, "Lord, give us this bread always." and he said, "I am the bread of life."

It is not accurate to conclude from this that Jesus didn't care about bread which is bread. After all, he had provided a substantial meal the day before. And I believe, only someone who knows about and loves the look and smell and touch and feel and taste of good bread, has the ability to use it as a metaphor for something else. My guess is that the one who called himself the bread of life, knew and loved and was something of an expert on that less august bread which fills the air with its bouquet, and the sight of which is an insistent reminder fo the needs of the flesh which, on measure, are among the creator's better ideas.

A faith that is powerfully life-giving and life-affirming is expressed not so much in acts of private piety but in personal acts of courage when we take a stand for life: when for instance our political and economic positions are corrected by our faith and not vice versa and we take a strong stand, get involved, give of ourselves. The PBS special "Chemical People" was essentially asking concerned folks to love and affirm life enough to get invovled in combatting the epidemic the deadly epidemic - of alcohol and drug abuse among the young. To take a stand for life in your community might mean doing that, getting involved in one of the many follow-up ventures here in Franklin County. Or it might mean asking elementary questions about how poor people are fed and housed in our community; and affirming life by working for justice and fairness and compassion. To make a faith commitment - on the side of life in our city might mean learning about the facts - not the stereotypes - but the truth about the system of public welfare and food stamps and utility bills, and how many people will be without heat this winter; or about health care and the plight of the elderly poor.

And it might mean looking clearly and carefully at our own lives and focussing on the opportunities each of us has every day, even within the context of our relationships with spouses, children, friends, colleagues, to "move out of death to life by loving..." That is the highest order of business for the church: to be the place where God's love in Jesus Christ is so fully experienced and expressed between people that they know, now and then, what it means to move from death to life.

It is not simple and it certainly is not easy. As a matter of fact love is very risky business. C. S. Lewis said that beautifully in a paragraph I'm tempted to read at every marriage: "Love anything," he wrote, "and your heart may be broken..." But the alternative, namely to risk nothing by loving sounds strikingly like death in the midst of life.

Robert Redford interviewed recently about his non-profit Film Lab in the mountains of Utah, where he spends most of his time, said: "Do you know what I learned from Utah, from living my life as I have? That you only keep things if you're willing to take risks - that you should make the best use you can of places and time, because with a certain success, a certain refinement in your life, you lose the very thing you started with, or you think you stand to lose it because the stakes are so high...so you try nothing new." (New York Times Magazine, 10/1/83)

From the beginning the appeal of stoicism has been enormous. "Risk nothing, lose nothing: love nothing, suffer nothing." And from the beginning it has been confronted by its diametric opposite - a Gospel about a God who loves so much that he gives an only son - who lays down his life in love. In philosophic terms and in the most personal, life centered terms, the Gospel of Jesus Christ calls us to acknowledge how much we are loved: to love life thoroughly because God loves it and to decide, to be; to move out of death into life by loving the people God gives us to love.

In a way that is what we intend to express in these financial pledges we make to our church. That is Stewardship at its best; not fund raising, but a deliberate decision to live by loving. We are trying, in many ways, to be a religious community which takes the imperative to love very seriously. It is not without risks - as we discover when someone steals our equipment; and it is not without inconvenience.

Most of us did not and will not, thank God, have to decide at 32 how to live the last eighteen months of our lives. And the depressed valleys most of us traverse on occasion, are relatively short. Yet both examples - Tom Dooley's life and Frost's haunting poem - suggest that each of us must choose to live: that human life, in all its magnificance, is more complex than the biological systems simply handed to us by our progenitors; that at the heart of it is a profound and elemental affirmation to live. Each of us is called by the giver of life to accept the gift, to embrace the gift, to celebrate and affirm it: to be who we are with high intentionality; with a bravery Paul Tillich eloquently described as "The Courage to Be."

To make that affirmation - to sieze life as it were - is to move from death to life; from the biological process of deterioration which begins, essentially, at our birth, to a glorious process of living life fully. It is perhaps the elemental human task.

Through history the function of religion and philosophy has been to help people find the path from death to life. Essentially the human race has chosen four ways to get there: knowledge, artistic beauty, religious mysticism and finally materialism. Death is negated and human life celebrated in the high intellectual expectations of Athens, the romantic art of the Renaissance, the devout piety of the monastery or in materialism - an alternative as old as the hedonist's invitation to "eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die."

Of the four, our culture returns most consistently to materialism. The consumer philosophy is not only a part of the market economy we are counting on to save us, it is also a theology - a way of trying to beat back the forces of death and affirm life. And at first blush it seems like a good alternative. What better way to affirm life than to indulge my desires, to gratify my needs, to take my wants seriously?

The trouble is that it doesn't work. In fact, the poets, philosophers and theologians suggest that as a methodology materialism actually ends up denying life. T. S. Eliot once said that an apt epitaph for our civilization might be:

> "Here were decent godless people
> Their only monument the asphalt road
> And a thousand lost golf balls."

Philosopher Sam Keen describes the "official version of the Good Life" with precision. "Happiness is a new car and a color TV. Security is a perimeter of ICBM's suurounding all 'hostile nations;' a large insurance policy, knowing your under-arm deodorant will keep you spring-fresh throughout the day, being well liked, having a good job....We begin to structure our time and energy to achieve what we 'desire:' we take jobs, make compromises, and settle down for a long wait, for the arrival that will bring the reward of happiness we so justly deserve..." (The Pastionate Life, p. 102)

The logical way to affirm one's own life is to get into one's self - or so it would seem. The trouble is, it doesn't work. The more self centered we become, the less we live. Dorothy Soelle has written a provocative book with the title "Death by Bread Alone" in which she describes in personal, behavioral terms what that deadly self centeredness looks and feels like. "Being alone and then wanting to be alone; being friendless, yet distrusting and despising others; forgetting and then

In the Soviet Union, at the other end of the political spectrum, the cost is identically precious. A recent New York Times Magazine feature on life in Russia contained a fascinating description of Christianity and the church in Soviet society. Official Marxist policy, of course, is that religion will wither away if left alone. And so churches are open. Since 1936, however, it has been illegal to teach, hold classes or discussion groups, or proselytize in any way. And when, in spite of official atheism, the church continues to appeal to people and attract interest, the state begins to exact a dear price indeed..."To lure the young away from midnight Easter services, state movie houses run American films that can never be seen at any other time; the only showings are at midnight. and for good measure...plain clothesmen circle the churches letting through the old and screening out the young. Names are taken and there are repercussions at schools and places of employment for those young people caught trying to enter." (10/16/83, "Russia, A People without Heroes," David K. Shipler, p. 38)

In terms reminiscent of our texts today, the article tells how, in rural areas particularly, the state removes children from Christian parents' custody, under the guise of protecting the health and welfare of minors.

One story, in particular, describes the cost of faithfulness. Father Dimitri Duko was a popular Orthodox preacher in Moscow in the early 70's. When the crowds of people in his church became embarrassingly large he was removed from his parish and reassigned to a remote congregation, where he continued to enjoy great success. In an interview at the time he said: "...the church in our country will always exist - because our country has the righest soil for Christianity. Here are suffering and persecution. It is not those wallowing in luxury who clutch at a straw."

Two years later he was arrested. Five months after his arrest, he appeared on Russian television to read his confession and apology, "I have seen that I have yielded to those propaganda voices that are directed at undermining our system. I repudiate what I have done..." (p. 90)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, martyred saint of modern Christendom, was executed by the Nazis a few days before the end of the Second World War. Bonhoeffer saw, with the clarity of a saint, that the greatest temptation of the modern church existing in a free society - is something he called cheap grace. He described it in words that are now familiar, "...forgiveness without repentance, baptism without discipline, communion with confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate." (The Cost of Discipleship, p. 36)

Bonhoeffer saw clearly that the call of Jesus Christ is to nothing less than total commitment. And that the loss - the tragedy - for anything less than that, is not the church's but the individual's. Bonhoeffer saw that the Gospel of Jesus Christ becomes an innocuous ritual for all those who cannot abide its serious call to obedience. "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die," he wrote. (p. 79)

We cheat only ourselves when we cast the Christian faith in softer terms. And we miss the point entirely if we think that all God demands of us is a nod of the head and a few dollars a week.

see P3 - My Decision for Human in our Choices -

And, as usual, in telling the story, the Bible catches us red-handed...pinning what can become an obsession with personal immortality on business success, academic reputation, fiscal security, military power - or even - the fine quality of children we have conceived, born and given to the world.

Abraham and we - need a reminder on occasion: namely that there is one eternal God - the fundamental monotheism of our faith, and that to hang our theological hopes on anything else is the fundamental human sin.

"Come now, preacher! We don't do that, really!" Theologian Langdon Gilkey suggests that when religious hope is gone, everything we do is designed to provide what religion used to provide - namely our salvation. Gilkey suggests, only partly with tongue in cheek, that the internal bickering, back-biting, an angling for position in any corporation or university faculty - is, in actually, a struggle for immortality.

Haven't you ever wondered about the intensity with which some parents urge on their children - on the athletic field or classroom, as if what happens or doesn't happen there is of eternal significance? Or, felt its pull in yourself?

Before you discard the Genesis incident as a barbaric relic and Abraham as a potential child abuser, allow the nuances of this story to raise the issue, at least, of the idols to which we happily sacrifice our children. The sculpture commemorating what happened a decade ago at Kent State is almost too powerful for us. It reminds us that there are idols and altars upon which we agree to sacrifice our young: the idol of ideology, the idol of success, the idol of appropriate behavior or dress and hair style - the defiance of which sometimes causes parents to turn on their own children: or the god of drugs and alcohol. Twenty teenagers will die today - because we are not honest enough to confront our cultural addiction to chemicals. Part of our idolatry is our unwillingness to confront the facts about ourselves. The cost is simply the sacrifice of the lives of children. When we allow the text to raise the tough issues, Abraham doesn't look so bad after all.

It is an intensely personal story. Abraham had to stand before God totally alone, and put the priorities on his life in order. I believe this is what the story is about, finally; not that God wants people to sacrifice their children to prove a point, but that God's love for us is so intensely personal that we must ultimately confront him alone, as individuals. We are in relationship: we believe what we believe as a community. But ultimately before God we must be who we are, ourselves, singly, alone.

God provides an appropriate substitute sacrifice on this ancient story. Abraham stood alone and trusted and was given his son, his life, his future, back again. And they came down from the mountain - father and son - seemingly no different than when they went up, yet nothing would ever be the same.

Centuries later, a descendant of Abraham and Isaac, was on his way to his lonely destiny. Jesus, on the road to Jerusalem, was teaching a necessary lesson about the cost of faithfulness. Once again the subject of the dearest human relationships emerged. "If any one comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."

That's what scared people about Jesus. That's what made Luther a threat to Rome. Both cared more about the vital creativity of God's living word than the forms and traditions of the moment. And that is why Christianity always has the potential to disturb and agitate and turn upside down that which is traditional. Christianity is, in essence, suspicious of its own forms. The Gospel of Jesus Christ is always a little suspicious of institutional religion.

Both Jesus and Luther desacralized religious tradition by claiming the sole sovereignty and holiness of God. God is sacred - not Catholic tradition, or Lutheran tradition or, for that matter, Broad Street Presbyterian tradition. Luther, our friend Walter Bouman, at Trinity Lutheran Seminary, likes to remind us, was not a Lutheran, didn't want a church named after him and assumed that the church was and always would be one. Calvin was not much of a Calvinist and Jesus of Nazareth, we must always remember, never heard the word Christian, but lived and died as a devout Jew.

Certainly part of continuing the spirit of Luther's reformation today is to acknowledge the finiteness of all religious tradition, regardless of how precious it is and how much we love it. The Ecumenical Movement expresses the essential oneness of a living church which transcends any and all the particular forms it now happens to take. Pope John Paul II said recently that he prays daily for wisdom in healing the 500 year old fracture of the church and, Pelikan notes wryly, that Rome regards Luther today not as a "wild boar in the Lord's Vineyard" but as something of a distinguished alumnus.

Certainly Brother Martin's reformation needs now to deal with the unprecedented explosion of Christian faith in the Southern Hemisphere in Third World nations. Very soon, most of the world's Christians will be living south of the Equator, in Africa and South America. And surely the continuation of Luther's reforming ways will lead us middle class Americans to handle our own traditions with love and eclipse. We Presbyterians now cheer when our rate of numerical decline is not as great as last year's. We Presbyterians - who provided the political theology for revolution and an institutional model for the Federal system of government - can't ever make it into the religion section of Time Magazine anymore. And we must learn to deal with that: to be as lean as God wants us to be.

We live in a dangerous world. Young Americans died last week - far from home, on two continents - in complex, ambiguous political circumstances. Clearly, whatever else it means, the world needs leaders with the courage to think new thoughts, the courage to discard the traditions of the past and find new forms - in the Near East, in Central America - which have the possibility of peace with justice. We are living at the edge of an age which promises vast and profound change: an almost scriptural age, full of apocalyptic danger and great promise. More than a century ago James Russell Lowell wrote a poem which seems to fit as never before:

"New occasions teach new duties. Time makes ancient good uncouth.
They must upward still, and onward, who would keep abreast of truth."

A special committee of church members met for six months recently to look at our mission and published an excellent report which evaluates our work in eight different categories. The conclusion is eloquent and provocative and consistent with Luther and Jesus. It reads: "We have concluded that the church is most alive and well when it has goals to which it is pointing and for which it is willing to be challenged. We have documented the ways in which the people of Broad Street Presbyterian Church have responded with faith, hope, love, and support...to accom-

Luther was summoned to appear before Holy Roman Emperor Charles V of Spain, at the Diet of Worms. It was there, under orders to recant, that he said: "I am bound in conscience, held captive by the word of God...I neither can nor will recant anything, for it's neither right nor safe to act against conscience. Here I stand. God help me. Amen." The Diet of Worms declared Luther an outlaw and heretic and placed a sentence of death on his head. Friends spirited him away to the castle fortress of Wartburg where, in hiding, he translated the Bible into German. Historians credit Luther with major impact in the emergence of the German nation - by giving it its language in this project. He also wrote hymns, one of which, based on Psalm 46, conjures up images of the Mighty Fortress of Wartburg in which he was hiding.

In 1525, when it was safe to return to Wittenberg and his post at the University, Luther married Katherine von Bora, a former nun who with eight other companions had left their convent and fled to Saxony. Luther, who was so earthy much of his table talk is unsuitable for public discourse today, later referred to the "wagon of vestal virgins" which descended upon him. Luther and his "Katie" had six children. They lived in a forty room former cloister and their home was full of people constantly: students, theologians, other reformers, many friends. He wrote a major tract, or article, or book, every two weeks the rest of his life. He preached regularly, beligerently with great strength. He died at the age of 63, in the village of his birth, having a few days before said, "God willing that I return to Wittenberg, I shall eat and drink heartily so the worms will have a good fat doctor of theology on which to feed."

Nothing would be more inconsistent with his own life than to romanticize this strong figure of history. Luther was a man of his day, a day very different from our own. Yale theologian Jaroslav Pelikan writing in the New York Times Magazine earlier this fall, notes: "Martin Luther had beliefs about devils and witches ...He could be stubborn and cantakerous and something of a bully." While at first condemning the exploitation of German Christians by Roman church officials, Luther later reversed his field and sided with the princes in a German peasant's revolt, advising the princes to slaughter as many as possible. He affirmed Jesus' Jewishness but late in life became virulently anti-semitic a tragic fact which another German movement, Naziism, happily exploited. He maintained the sanctity of conscience and his own right to civil disobedience but later advised obedience to the state under all circumstances in a way that historians sometimes claim assisted the rise of Fascism in Germany.

He was far from perfect. But his contributions to the church - and to the world - were enormous. Lord Acton, a 19th Century, British Catholic historian, said that Luther's courageous stand at the Diet of Worms was "the most pregnant and momentous fact of our history." Freedom of conscience, human liberty, the sanctity of the individual was being born. We Presbyterians are inclined to conclude that it took John Calvin to think it through thoroughly and institutionalize it. But, obviously, here, in the experience of Luther, this radically creative idea, emerged for one of the first and most important times.

Luther departed from a 1000 year tradition by suggesting that all Christians have a vocation - not just clergy, a calling to be faithful followers of Jesus Christ. He got Christians reading the Bible in their own language, singing in church and, among his greatest contributions was the restoration of marriage and human sexuality to its rightful and Biblical perspective as a gift of God to be enjoyed. Luther and Katherine married to express a point - namely that the traditional celibacy of the church was no more holy than marriage and then fell wonderfully and physically in love. Professor Pelikan thinks that one of Luther's and Katie's greatest and

God insists on the struggle. It is a haunting thought! In one of Frederick Nietzchi's novels a character is talking about why God must die. "God looks with eyes that see everything. He peers into man's ground and depth, into his hidden shame and ugliness." And Paul Tillich wrote: "He is God only because he is inescapable."

The Jabbok, by the way, is not on the map. The stream - the place - is insignificant. So our Jabboks, the places where God catches up with us, will be remote, obscure: perhaps not sitting in church at all, but alone, at night, trying to sleep. Dorothee Soelle, in her book Death By Bread Alone, tells about trying to live through a period of deep personal darkness. She writes, "I had reached the end of the line and God had scrapped the first draft of the design for my life. He had not comforted me as a psychologist would. He had not offered me any of the placebos society usually prescribes...He knocked me to the ground. Gradually it began to dawn on me that people who believe, limp somewhat, as Jacob limped after wrestling with God." (p. 32)

It is God Jacob is wrestling and so we can expect the story to be repeated for us. "Why are we all limping?" J. Barrie Shepherd asks in a poem based on this story:

> Can it be this love of God
> must wound us so that it can heal us?
> Might this halting hip of Jacob signify
> that when we do contend with love, when we
> grapple with and finally are transformed by
> the power of God's grace we become
> more vulnerable, not less:
> more likely to get hurt than
> those who chose always to play it safe..."

If we have lived life, we all limp a little finally. We may not be guilty of Jacob's crassness and avarice, but if we have lived we know a bit about moral compromise and expediency. We all limp home finally with the bright dreams of youth a little faded, with our banners a bit soiled and torn: with failures as well as successes, in our satchel with our weaknesses as well as our strengths clearly revealed.

If we have lived life and if, along the way, we have been accosted by God we will limp a bit. But along the way we will have come to understand that the limp is a gift - a mark of something wonderful. We will have known that God loves and accepts us in spite of our failures: that God loves our humanness more than we have ever been able to love it: that God gives us what we can never earn - namely his grace and love and presence.

The one who learned it first was a distant relative to another who affirmed our humanity by taking it upon himself: Jacob - distant relative of Jesus - who lived our life and died our death and showed us God's great love for us and in whose humanity you and I are given back our own humanity.

The story doesn't end - as all good stories never end. Jacob held on till morning and then, in the light of a new day, limped across the Jabbok into the promised land to live the rest of his life as God's chosen; the same Jacob, but with a new name now and a limp to remind him of that strange night long ago and the incredible thought which I imagine never left him until the day he died - the idea of God, a God who loves and cares and accosts and forces us to wrestle through the night. Amen.